

The Museum of Modern Art

For Immediate Release
July 1989

SISKIND FROM THE COLLECTION

July 20 - October 10, 1989

A concise retrospective of works by American photographer Aaron Siskind (b. 1903), drawn from the collection of The Museum of Modern Art, opens on July 20 and continues through October 10, 1989. Selected by John Szarkowski, director of the Department of Photography, SISKIND FROM THE COLLECTION ranges from documentary photographs of the 1930s to recent work of the last year. The exhibition is comprised of thirty-one black-and-white photographs and features the abstract images for which he is best known.

Siskind began photographing in the early 1930s, motivated by work he had seen at the Film and Photo League, a leftist photo cooperative in New York. He led photographic surveys of the city's neighborhoods that were documentary in form and social in intent. Siskind's contributions to Harlem Document, a collection of carefully ordered images of street vendors, storefronts, and tenements, typify the achievement of the Photo League at its apex. The photographs do not attempt to document or judge the harshness of reality, but give the appearance of cinema verité.

In the early 1940s, feeling discontented with the limitations of his documentary work, Siskind began making close-up photographs of peeling paint, torn movie posters, and tar drippings that become abstract, two-dimensional images. His photographs of the next two decades parallel the work of the Abstract Expressionists, namely Franz Kline, Mark Rothko, and Robert Motherwell with whom he developed close associations. Random patterns and textures conjure poetic associations: a piece of seaweed reads like Chinese calligraphy

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and rock formations assume the power of totems. Exhibited at the prominent Charles Egan Gallery, New York, these images were more readily accepted by artists than photographers and established Siskind as an integral figure in post-war art.

Over the years, Siskind has traveled widely and experimented with new subjects. The Pleasures and Terrors of Levitation (1954), for example, is a series of photographs of people suspended above a trampoline, their haphazard choreography frozen into fantastic shapes. An influential teacher, he has persuaded generations of younger photographers that the formal integrity of the image is an essential requirement of a successful photograph. Of his work, Siskind has written, "When I make a photograph, I want it to be an altogether new object, complete and self-contained, whose basic condition is order--unlike the world of events and actions whose permanent condition is change and disorder."

Born on New York's Lower East Side in 1903, Siskind studied at the City College of New York and taught English in New York public schools from 1926 to 1949. He taught photography briefly with Harry Callahan at the influential Black Mountain College (1951), and later the Rhode Island School of Design (1971-76). For twenty years he was a professor and later head of the photography department of the Institute of Design, Illinois Institute of Technology (1951-71). Siskind was a coeditor of Choice, a magazine of poetry and photography, and his work has been published extensively, most recently in Harlem Document (1981) and Aaron Siskind: Pleasures and Terrors (1983). The Museum of Modern Art has collected and exhibited Siskind's photographs since 1941. Siskind lives and continues to work in Providence, Rhode Island.

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For further information or photographic materials, contact the Department of Public Information, 212/708-9750.